

Backstage at 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show'

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'Mary, it needs one beat of wistfulness'

A week of togetherness on the MTM set

By Dwight Whitney

When Allan Burns and his partner, Jim Brooks, were preparing early episodes of the then-fledgling *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, a situation comedy they had just invented, word began to filter down from CBS headquarters in New York that the partners, who had come to prominence writing scripts for *Room 222*, were "asking for trouble." Where were the big boffo "block-comedy" scenes, à la Lucy Ball, in which the heroine gets locked into a roomful of rampaging chimpanzees and on which all "comedy shows" are traditionally built?

Worse still, they had cast *TMTMS* with actors instead of comedians. How did they expect to get any yoks out of a man like Edward Asner, for instance, who had built his reputation playing Shakespeare and Bertolt Brecht? The writing? Highly suspect, particularly a story in which Nancy Walker was to guest-star as a Jewish mother. Not only was it "unfunny," it was "offensive."

Less than a year later this particular script and this particular "actor" were

to win Emmy Awards for comedy. Meantime, however, network panjandrum dispatched a memo spelling out their concept of how a winning sitcom ought to go. "Mary should be presented with a problem," it read in part. "Toward the end she should solve that problem in a surprising and comical manner." It was also suggested that if Mary dated a visiting prince or two it might jazz up the story.

The executive producers, who by this time had been joined by a couple of other equally freewheeling newcomers (line producer Dave Davis and script consultant Lorenzo Music), had other ideas. Visiting princes didn't fit into their scheme. The perils of a single girl trying to survive the business jungle by being nice about it hardly had the fire-power of, say, an Archie Bunker, who was to shake up the situation-comedy business half a season later. Still, they knew where their strengths lay.

"We firmly resist Mary doing zany things just to get laughs," Burns explained a few weeks ago. "She never tramps out wine grapes with her bare feet or gets mixed up in the chorus line at the Copacabana. We start with an everyday premise recognizable to everyone and assume reasonable intelligence on the part of our characters."

"Mary is a possible person—a woman reacting in a basically womanly way. We surround her with possible people. She's at her best when slightly out of her depth. She plays that better than anybody..."

Monday: The first day of rehearsal on an episode called "The Slaughter Affair." The read-through that morning in Burns' office has gone swimmingly. The star, chicly encased in black boots and plaid knickers, sits in a powder-blue canvas director's chair doing her needlepoint—a green frog on a white background. Just a few steps away is her splendidly appointed "star" dressing room. Empty as usual. Mary likes to be where the action is.



MTM's Group (left to right, standing): Allan Burns, Valerie Harper, Edward Asner, Ted Knight; (seated): Gavin MacLeod, Miss Moore, Cloris Leachman, James Brooks.

The action today, as every day, is on Stage 2 at CBS Studio Center, a three-camera stage with a shallow bank of powder-blue upholstered bleachers to accommodate the 294 spectators who will witness the filming Friday night. Right now the bleachers are empty. Nor are there any cameras in evidence.

Between stitches Mary chats amiably about how Richard Deacon taught her needlepoint when they were on the old *Dick Van Dyke Show* together; how aggravating it is trying to find a decent place to eat in Malibu; and how great Gavin MacLeod is going to be in the show—the balding MacLeod, who plays newswriter Murray Slaughter, is featured this week.

Mary Tyler Moore is not an overpoweringly beautiful woman. The aloofness, the mystery of the old-time movie queen are no longer salable items in movies, even less so in TV. There is no sense of manifest destiny—only a woman concerned with her husband,

her child, her fellow workers, and a green frog on a white needlepoint background. Approachable may be the key word. Anybody can identify. In television that's a commodity worth millions.

The mood carries over onto the set. This is a woman who, after her youthful success with Dick Van Dyke, had flunked out of the movies and, even worse, been ridiculed by the theater crowd for her efforts in a David Merrick fiasco called "Holly Golightly." All that is changed. Now, a season and a half into *TMTMS*, she confidently presides over her own Era of Good Feelings.

Her pal, Valerie Harper, a funny-intense young actress who came out of improvisational theater and now plays the sharp-tongued Rhoda, sits down next to her. They put their heads together and snicker. "What cracks me up," Valerie confides moments later, "is that she is never 'the star.' She insists on being a fellow player."

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Mary's husband, Grant Tinker, an executive who used to be noted for his narrow ties, comes by. He is dressed mod in the mode of the set. It is he who set in motion the machinery that put Brooks and Burns in charge. Mary is not much for show-biz talk. They discuss the latest from Mary's son, Richie, off on one of those floating preparatory-school cruises. And the "square Middle West" which, Mary says, doesn't seem to be that square any more. She would like to get into Grant's Cadillac and tour the area. "We never quite seem to make it," says Tinker idly. "We're water people and usually end up at the Kahala Hilton."

Cloris Leachman, who plays Mary's neighbor, is not here this week. Mary misses "our crazy lady of the fluttering hands and batting eyelids."

Out of the corner of her eye she watches Peter Baldwin, who is filling in for regular director Jay Sandrich this week. Mary likes Peter. Young. Conscientious. Inventive. Fun. He is working out the timing on Gavin's and Ed's yawn scene. Yawns are tricky, Asner explains. They slow the pace and there is always the danger that the audience will yawn, too.

Mary seems oblivious to the danger. The show has run similar risks almost weekly ever since it began last season. "It will all work out," Mary thinks. "A three-camera show gives time to react, time to get the flow. I'm not worried."

* * *

Tuesday: Things have gone too smoothly the day before, so it is time for a few emergencies. Marge Mullen, the script girl, calls in sick. Then the word comes through that Sandy Duncan of *Funny Face* has gone in for a serious eye operation.

Mary looks as if a house had fallen on her. She doesn't know Miss Duncan very well, but suddenly that old show-must-go-on stuff doesn't operate. She identifies strongly with the young girl just breaking into the medium. Her eyes glaze and she disappears into the "star" dressing room for the first and

only time during the week.

Ten minutes later she plunges into her scene with Valerie, one of those late-at-night coffee-klatsch affairs full of girl talk. If she was shaken you would never know it. The problem, as usual, is to get some movement into a talky scene. Mary is supposed to register surprise by spilling the coffee. But this hoary business doesn't work. "Van Dyke did it last week," Mary says. Then she tries freezing the pot in midair and holding to the end of the scene.

Still the scene doesn't go snap-crackle-pop. This is a slow, painful process, comedy. There are so many loose ends to be tied up, so many things that read better than they play. Already a dozen new pages have come down from mimeo. By Thursday morning there will be an entirely new script . . .

* * *

Wednesday: Mary gets the late word on Sandy Duncan. Things are looking better and she is cheered. Joyce Bulifant, who is playing MacLeod's child-like wife, shows on the set for the first time. It's only one scene, but she has Mary teary-eyed at the first rehearsal. "Stop *doing* that, Joyce. You'll send us all back to drama class."

At 10:20 "anchor man" Ted Knight waltzes in, singing *Hello my baby/Hello my sweetie/Hello my ragtime doll*. "Morning, Mair. Morning, guys," he booms in his Ted Baxter basso. Ted is a veteran voice man (*Superboy, Aquaman, etc.*) who finally made it big as a kind of electronic Mr. Beautiful. And a lot of the character has just naturally rubbed off on him. "Mair, you look sensational," he exclaims joyfully. "You'd look good in a burlap bag."

At 11:30 Burns and his boys get their first real look at the show. They line up in the powder-blue directors' chairs, laughing as if they'd never heard the jokes before. And they talk:

"Beautiful, Gavin!" . . . "Really nice, Ed, but we need a look to get Ted off the desk. He's still afraid of you, you know." . . . "Mary, it needs one beat →

continued

of wistfulness; we're playing two." . . .
"Ted, start your cross a little sooner."
. . . "I love what Joyce is doing, but
she's going an inch too far fighting the
tears." . . .

But Valerie's scene needs more than
honing. "It's just the words that don't
work," opines Burns. "We'll send down
some new ones in the morning."

* * *

Thursday: Camera-blocking day. Stage 2 suddenly bristles with booms, cables, dollies, cameras. The once-unmarked floor is now a complex maze of marking tape, so the earphone-equipped men who handle the dollies will know where to position themselves. Camera-coordinator Don Bustany has temporarily set up his command post on a card table. "Jimmy, ready to go on Gavin's cross," he barks into the mouthpiece. "That's my boy."

"Ugh, boring day!" grumbles Asner as he moseys over to help production manager Lin Ephraim work a jigsaw puzzle.

Mary appears, looking enchanting in purple leotards. It is her dance day so she brown-paperbags her lunch. Already the piano, practice bar and mirrors are in place on the set. At 12:50 Mary's red-haired instructress appears, trailing a rehearsal pianist.

Across the lot in the upstairs offices of MTM Enterprises, Inc., Dave Davis and Lorenzo Music lay on some of the facts of TV life. The show is running about two minutes over. There have been heavy cuts and rewrites. Valerie's scene has been rearranged and will play much more crisply.

"A beautiful way to work," Davis says, tapping the freshly minted script. "Three-camera means you can rehearse it like a play, then put it on film all at once."

"One-camera, which shoots in bits and pieces, locks you in," Lorenzo offers. "Once you've shot it, that's it. We polish right up to show time. . . ."

* * *

Friday: The call is for noon. The afternoon will be spent toning and hon-

ing and psyching up. It makes for a lot of highs and lows. What looked good all week tends to look ragged. Even Ted is nervous.

Mary plays it cool. "I've got good vibes," she assures everyone. "It will come together by tonight."

"Really great pace, guys," Burns says, after the final run-through. No real problems. All the new dialogue works to perfection. Even the yawns seem viable. Dave Davis says, "From here on in we're a bunch of fight managers holding the stool."

The company retires to the commissary for roast beef. Conversation is subdued, the quiet time before battle. Valerie breaks the mood. "Well," she says cheerily, "time to go to my dressing room and tense up."

By 7:30 the bleachers are filled. As usual Lorenzo, in a brown-velvet jacket, will do the warm-up, very low-key and folksy. Mary introduces the cast and tells the audience, "If you don't think it's funny, laugh anyway. We need it. . . ."

The performance starts slowly, with laughs coming in unexpected places and some of the big yoks drawing mere titters. Ted's voice is coming up hoarse and Allan thinks they may have to loop his dialogue.

But things pick up in Valerie's scene. Joyce and Gavin are fine in the final sequence. Of course, it doesn't exactly have them weeping out loud, but it's going to play beautifully on film.

Still, there is a perceptible undercurrent of disappointment. "So it's not a big laugh for a studio audience," Mary shrugs as the bleachers begin to empty. "There was empathy; they got involved in Gavin's problem."

Now there are only a few pick-up shots to be made. Ordinarily they might take as much as five minutes to film. But the heat's off, and Asner keeps breaking up at Ted. It is 10:10 before the set goes dark. . . .

Two weeks later, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* moved for the first time into the Top 5 television shows in the land. (END)